

Louis Bromfield and Wendell Berry:
Exemplary Environmentalists

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Alison M. Phillips

Dr. Mathis-Eddy

Darlene Mathis-Eddy
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Purpose of Thesis

"Louis Bromfield and Wendell Berry: Exemplary Environmentalists" illuminates the inspiring lifeworks of Louis Bromfield and Wendell Berry. The visions and examples of these men challenge concerned individuals to strive for harmonious relationships with the earth in their everyday lives. My personal involvement with Malabar Farm State Park provides the framework for this exploration. The essay is followed by "Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision," a grant proposal narrative which details my plans for increasing public awareness of Louis Bromfield's contributions to the environmental movement.

My sister and I stood and shivered in our sweat at the first sight of that icy fountain on a midsummer afternoon. I was ten. The spring water bubbled down from the sandstone, flowed through the nearly two century-old spring house, and then gushed up into the troughs of the old roadside market where I stood watching it tumble like a waterfall into a drain that channeled it under the road to a watercress bed. Unless my great-aunt and uncle who brought me there explained it to me, I doubt that I was conscious of all those intricacies. I do remember that the trough was just the right height for me to stretch my arms horizontally and catch the water. It overflowed and gurgled in my hands until I slurped it up. I always picture our stop there as the last event of that first trip to Malabar Farm State Park near Lucas, Ohio. From then on, I always wanted to visit the hardworking spring first; now, when I travel there on my own, it is my first and last stop.

My parents took my sister and me back to Malabar, and on through my high school years we brought family and friends to share it with us. I had grown more and more fascinated, not only with the spring, but with the stories. There was a house tour and a wagon ride, and soon I was telling the stories myself--filling in details a certain guide would delete and sponging up those he or she would add. On several occasions our family attended Malabar's Heritage Days. We thought of coming for a sugaring-off sometime. Once we hiked one of the nature trails. It was a

short one that the naturalist always suggested on the wagon tour--just off the main path in Doris Duke woods.

Malabar made me comfortable, and I fancied myself to be an amateur expert about the place. It was not, however, until my second semester of college that I learned to appreciate Malabar Farm State Park as far more than an attractive recreational facility. Malabar Farm was originally established as an educational and inspirational place where people were intended to gain an understanding of their relationship with the land. Ideally, they would leave the farm with an idea of how they could engage themselves in a healthy and fulfilling interaction with their own corners of earth.

Each year more than one hundred and seventy-five thousand people visit the Park. As I grew to appreciate Malabar's ecological significance, it became imperative to me that each of it's guests should leave the grounds with more than a mental image of a mansion and its lovely landscape. They should leave, I thought, with a new vision for planet earth. For this reason, I drafted a grant proposal to fund the implementation of a narrated tour of Malabar Farm on audio cassette which I had designed. Its message is that "The endangered environment is not a holiday oasis; it is also our home and workplace. It is therefore essential that we begin to live in our homes and workplaces with the same care and respect that we have typically reserved for the pretty places we see fit to sanctify and

protect." Louis Bromfield, author, conservationist, and founder of Malabar Farm, and Wendell Berry, contemporary novelist, poet, essayist, farmer, and environmental-advocate, have lived and written about this way of life. Their examples challenge Americans to reinvent their relationships with the earth.

Born in Mansfield, Ohio four years before the arrival of the twentieth century, Louis Bromfield early became a writer exuding potential. He was regarded as a novelist with more promise than Ernest Hemingway. His smashing successes opened to him a lifestyle oozing with 1920's glamour and glitz. The eve of World War II found him residing with his family in a quaint Parisian suburb.

Bromfield wrestled with his options for relocation:

When I returned home, I knew that permanence, continuity . . . was what I wanted, not the glittering life of New York and Washington, not the intellectual life of the universities. What I wanted was a piece of land which I could love passionately, which I could spend the rest of my life in cultivating, cherishing and improving . . . (Bromfield, Pleasant Valley 8-9).

He chose to return to his eastern Ohio homeland where he purchased and consolidated four depleted farms. He called the place Malabar Farm, named for the Malabar Coast of India. Employing innovative and ecologically-sound agricultural techniques, he began restoring the land to top

fertility. Bromfield rejected the idea that land is a mine that owes us a living. Instead he saw that that humans interact with the land as caretakers, giving it the treatment it needs to be healthy and fruitful.

Economically and philosophically I believe that good and productive soil is the very basis of man's existence, well-being and prosperity. Certainly it is the very foundation of the average farmer's success and prosperity. One of my earliest memories is of standing in the garden of my grandfather's farm and experiencing a feeling of distress almost approaching sickness at the sight of the 'poor spots' in the fields of corn wherever there was a slope or a knoll and the soil had grown thin. I wanted the whole of the field to be deep, rich and green and I think that marked the very beginning of a life long passion for gardening, farming and soils (Bromfield, From My Experience 176, 177).

Bromfield employed grass farming in response to the specific needs of his land. Originally he relied upon grass for its healing powers. With it he could bring the mineral wealth of the rich subsoil to surface in order to rejuvenate the depleted topsoil; he could prevent erosion by allowing the grass to anchor the dirt where it belonged; he could retain moisture by letting the systems of roots drink up the rain and dew; he could restore the earth's organic material by

mowing off cuttings of grass or by plowing the whole plant into the soil, setting in motion the cycle of decay and renewal. Eventually, Bromfield recognized that Malabar was simply best suited for grass farming. He maximized profit by turning the natural resource of nutrient-packed grasses into milk, cheese, and beefsteaks. Bromfield encouraged other farmers to recognize the crops which best suited their particular soil, climate, topography, market and labor considerations.

Disillusioned with fiction-writing, Bromfield began to write books about his experiences at Malabar and criticizing American agricultural practices. His four major works, Pleasant Valley, Malabar Farm, From My Experience and Out of the Earth, are passionate pleas for "proper land use," agricultural reform, and renewed appreciation for the majesties and intricacies of the web of life. Bromfield died in 1956, leaving Malabar as an illustration of how life may be lived on earth with companionship, thoughtfulness, and awe.

Twenty years before Bromfield's death, Wendell Berry was born in Henry County, Kentucky. After receiving bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Kentucky, Berry traveled to California, Europe, and New York during an seven year period of establishing himself as a writer and teacher of literature. He returned to Kentucky in 1965 because it had become "increasingly clear" that he had a "lifework to do, though not all of it as a writer"

(Merchant 38). Berry purchased Lane's Landing Farm-- twelve acres of marginal farmland adjacent to The Camp, a wooded, riverside property that had belonged to his bachelor uncle, Curran Mathews. In 1972 Berry purchased an abandoned, forty-acre housing development and began "to attempt a life . . . that would be responsibly agricultural" (Berry, Recollected Essays: 1965-1980 332).

Because we did not want to pollute our land and water with sewage, and in the process waste nutrients that should be returned to the soil, we built a composting privy We used no chemical fertilizers. Except for a little rotenone, we used no insecticides We were not, of course, living an idyll. What we had done could not have been accomplished without difficulty and a great deal of work. And we had some mistakes and false starts. But there was great satisfaction . . . in restoring the neglected land... (Berry, Recollected Essays: 1965-1980 332).

This land and the whole of his native Kentucky hill country is the prominent theme of Berry's writing. Anchoring himself to his place on earth with ever-deepening commitment, Berry, now 59 years old, continues to be a careful critic of American agriculture and society in general.

During the past thirty years, environmental or

ecological issues have gained international attention. Environmentalism has become a fad of sorts, engendering buttons, t-shirts, magazines, music, and rallies. Surrounded by hosts of self-proclaimed environmentalists, Berry and Bromfield have emphasized the importance of example-setting. In the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles, they have taken significant personal action. Their examples challenge us not to wait until some master plan has been legislated into place before we begin to alter our attitudes and behaviors regarding the earth and our relationships to it.

Bromfield and Berry have sometimes differed in their specific farming techniques, but their methods have shared the same motivation--that is, kindly use or ethical treatment of the land. Aldo Leopold argued in his classic work A Sand County Almanac for a land ethic, maintaining that such an ethic would be the next logical progressive reform in a democratic society. For Berry and Bromfield, ethical treatment of the land has presupposed an intimate knowledge of it. Their relationships with fields, woodlots, streams, and springs have been dominated by the depths of understanding and experience they have developed rather than the requirements of science, technology, and profits. This approach to agriculture is in sharp contrast to the dominant, conventional attitudes. Environmentalists who focus exclusively on the need to preserve wilderness would be remiss to ignore or underestimate the importance of

Bromfield and Berry's work. As Berry acknowledges in his essay "The Making of A Marginal Farm," there is an immense gulf "between cherishing a place and living responsibly in it" (330). Through their written work and agricultural endeavors, Berry and Bromfield have taken on the enormous task of reforming civilization's most basic relationships with the earth. Until our society revises these relationships with the land--until it renews its vision of agriculture--there is little hope for significant, pervasive, and lasting environmental reform. The struggle to transform the everyday businesses of life penetrates to the core of our ecological predicaments.

The exemplary lives of Bromfield and Berry are invaluable patterns for the contemporary environmental movement. They do not provide all of the specific answers to agricultural and environmental dilemmas, but they inspire us with the spirit of true reform--thus the purpose of my narrated tour of Malabar on audio cassette: to challenge and inspire Malabar Farm State Park's visitors. By exploring new places within the Park, by hearing its history, and by learning about Bromfield's dreams for the place in his own words, guests will experience Malabar's vitality and grasp its significance. Most importantly, they will be stimulated to examine their daily impact on the earth with new understanding and vision.

The narrated tour has not yet been implemented at Malabar Farm State Park, but my enthusiasm for the message

of visionaries like Bromfield and Berry has not diminished. Their successes and failures alike inspire students of their work to continue despite disappointments. The hardworking spring at Malabar is a testimony to the power of Bromfield's lifetime efforts to live responsibly on the earth.

One-time, personal projects will not be enough to sustain the strength and health of a single spring, let alone the world. Ecological sustainability will require nothing less than lifetimes of commitment.

Works Consulted

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Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision

Project Narrative

Submitted to

Ohio Environmental Education Fund

Environmental Protection Agency

September 1991

BACKGROUND OF MALABAR FARM STATE PARK

Malabar Farm State Park is managed with the goal of educating the public about the lifework of Louis Bromfield, a native Ohioan, who used his talents as a Pulitzer Prize winning author to form attitudes of many people concerning conservation practices and farming methods. Malabar Farm State Park maintains attractive facilities including Bromfield's Big House, a working farm complex, campground and picnic areas, a youth hostel, and a day-use building. The park also offers public programs year round which highlight the work Bromfield pioneered in the realm of conservation agriculture. These programs, which include displays, exhibits, day programs, workshops, and weekend festivals, are designed to provide visitors with firsthand exposure to Bromfield's conservation ideas.

PROJECT SUMMARY

By financing "Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision," the Ohio Environmental Education Fund will be supporting the production of two creative environmental education resources which will enhance Malabar Farm State Park's ability to teach Malabar's visitors. One of the environmental education resources to be produced through this program is a narrative cassette tape with musical accompaniment for a walking tour of two lesser known park areas, Doris Duke Woods and "Up Ferguson Way." While visitors experience Malabar's restored beauty and vitality, the narrative explains how Bromfield nursed the depleted fields and

ravaged forests back to health with careful planning and thoughtful living. The tape uses creative writing, music, and performance to stimulate the learning process. The narrative addresses specific environmental concerns such as the importance of pure and abundant ground water, soil conservation, soil fertility, and wildlife. Twenty tapes will be made available for rental through the park's gift shop for \$2.00 a piece. Participants in this self-guided walking tour will be given a map of the trails with a children's worksheet on the back designed by the author of the narrative. The worksheet will include five questions to help children focus on key concepts presented in the script and five questions which focus on the children's experience while on the tour. Children who complete the worksheet will be given a certificate. In addition to rental tapes, the gift shop will make 100 cassettes available for sale at \$5.00 each.

The other resource to be produced with the OEEF's assistance is a printed manuscript in booklet form entitled "The Venture of Louis Bromfield: The Vision Lingers." Booklets currently available through the park's gift shop provide biographical information about Bromfield, but this new material provides a creatively written biography of Bromfield's vision for Malabar Farm. Alison Phillips, a frequent visitor at the park since childhood, was inspired by Bromfield's book Pleasant Valley to investigate Malabar's history. The manuscript which resulted from her research

provides basic information about soil and water stewardship, acquaints visitors with Bromfield's contribution to a worldwide ecological awakening, traces the development of Malabar from one man's dream to a state park, and exposes the complexities of balancing land ethics, financial constraints, and public service. One thousand and four hundred booklets will be printed and sold in the gift shop for \$3.00 a piece.

PROJECT JUSTIFICATION

According to the definition adopted by the OEEF Trustees, the acquisition of "information and beliefs which lead to decisions and actions that result in a healthier, sustainable world" is an integral aspect of environmental education. It was upon this principal that Malabar Farm was founded by farmer and novelist, Louis Bromfield, in 1939. Bromfield was firmly convinced that members of both the rural and urban communities needed to be educated about the devastation that occurs when human beings mine the land for its resources. He used his wealth, time, and talent, to teach the public about interacting with the fields and forests respectfully and for mutual sustenance and benefit. Bromfield believed the most effective and creative vehicle for this sort of education was example; so he turned four depleted farms into a show place designed to demonstrate to farmers and members of the urban population that it was both possible and practical to increase the health and productivity of the land.

In his book "From My Experience" Bromfield wrote,

And so, for fifteen years I have worked and suffered and sometimes spent money which I should not have spent, not merely upon restoring land and achieving rich crops, but in the creation of something more than that . . . a whole farm, a whole landscape, in which I could live in peace and with pride and which I could share with others to whom it would bring pleasure.

Malabar Farm still brings pleasure to others today, thirty-five years after Bromfield's death. It is the conviction of Malabar Farm State Park and the Ohio Department of Natural Resources that Malabar should also provide its visitors with environmental education and awareness. Malabar Farm State Park believes guests should know that an informed and active concern for the environment made Malabar's beauty possible. The proposed environmental education resources will bring this information alive for the over 175,000 people who visit Malabar each year. In addition, "Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision" is a self-sustaining program which will continue to exist long after the OEEF has granted the initial funds because the creators of both environmental education resources have agreed to allow the park to reproduce their materials in the future as needed without paying royalty fees. The sales and rentals of the educational resources will support future reproduction costs.

PROJECT GOAL/OBJECTIVES

The goal of "Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision" is to produce two environmental education resources in order to enhance environmental education at Malabar Farm State Park. A series of direct actions will support this goal.

Alison Phillips, originator of both resources, will edit the manuscript entitled "The Venture of Louis Bromfield: The Vision Lingers." Alison Phillips and Eric Appleby, composer of the audio cassette's musical accompaniment, will produce the original narrative tour on cassette. Malabar Farm State Park will purchase these creative educational tools to have them professionally printed, produced, and duplicated. Then Malabar Farm State Park will make these resources available for sale and rental in the gift shop.

ACTIVITIES AND TIMELINE

- Month 1: Phillips edits manuscript, selects photos, and designs children's worksheet and certificate. Park collects slides for promotional presentation, designs map, commissions printing of booklet, worksheet and certificate.
- Month 2: Phillips edits audio cassette script. Phillips and Appleby set script to music.
- Month 3: Phillips and Appleby record audio cassette. Appleby completes post-production of tape.
- Month 4: Park commissions duplication of cassette, purchases trail markers and trail counter. Volunteer association installs trail markers

and trail counter. Phillips writes press release announcing funding of "Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision." Park distributes press release.

Month 12: Both environmental education resources and the worksheet/maps are ready for sale and rental. Park purchases audio equipment and batteries.

Month 13: Park begins sales and rentals. Phillips and Appleby assist with the completion of promotional slide presentation.

Month 14: Phillips writes press release announcing availability of environmental education resources. Releases are distributed. Park contacts Ohio Magazine and other publications about feature articles.

Month 23: Data from sales, rentals, and trail counter is collected. Park writes self-evaluation and submits to OEEF.

COLLABORATION

"Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision" is a project that pools the energy and resources of three organizations and two individuals. Malabar Farm State Park, the applicant organization, is being supported in this venture by Alison Phillips, Bucyrus, Ohio; Eric Appleby, Danville, Illinois; Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana; and Volunteers In Parks, Lucas, Ohio.

Alison Phillips, author of the audio cassette script and "The Venture of Louis Bromfield: The Vision Lingers," has been actively involved in the preparation of the grant proposal. Phillips will continue to contribute to the projects by creating and designing the children's worksheet and certificate and by writing press releases to notify the public concerning the new program. She will also work with Eric Appleby, composer of the script's musical accompaniment, to professionally produce the original cassette tape. Both Phillips and Appleby are donating a portion of their labor and materials costs.

Phillips' creation of the project's educational resources was originally made possible by Ball State University. Through the Undergraduate Fellowship program at Ball State, she was awarded \$1500 and was provided with a faculty mentor with which to conduct her research.

The Malabar Farm Volunteer Association, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the park program and operation, will donate the labor needed to establish and maintain the trail and install the trail counter.

PROJECT RESULTS

"Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision" will produce two environmental education resources which will enhance environmental education at Malabar Farm State Park. Those who participate in the program by purchasing a booklet or by renting or buying a tape will have an increased awareness of several basic environmental concerns and of the benefits of

sustainable farming practices. They will better understand how Bromfield nursed depleted fields and ravaged forests back to health. Most importantly, at a time when many people are overwhelmed by vast environmental issues, this program will use Bromfield's example to inspire visitors to live in ways that "result in a healthier, sustainable world."

Malabar Farm State Park will determine the project's impact by monitoring the number of tapes and booklets it rents or sells. The park will also install a trail counter in Doris Duke Woods. The number of hikers recorded prior to the availability of the tape will be compared to the number recorded at corresponding times following the implementation of the proposed program.

DISSEMINATION

The environmental education tools which result from this project will be placed on display for sale and rental in Malabar Farm State Park's gift shop. Malabar Farm State Park will invite the public to make use of its new educational resources by coordinating the script narrative with a slide presentation to be shown outside of the park. The park will also send press releases to state and local newsletters (eg. publications released by the Ohio chapters of organizations like the Nature Conservancy and Sierra Club) and newspapers (eg. Mansfield News Journal), and will encourage Ohio Magazine and other publications to include a feature article about the new program.

PROJECT UPDATE

"Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision" was refused funding as of February 1992. Since this date, however, I have consulted with OEEF staff about improving the proposal and have been encouraged to resubmit the project. I have also reviewed a number of proposals submitted to the National Endowment for the Humanities to obtain ideas for strengthening my work. In addition, Dr. Glenda Riley has critiqued the proposal and made suggestions for its revision and augmentation.

The prospect of resubmitting the proposal is complicated because Malabar Farm State Park has changed park managers since the project's original completion. The process of reapplication, therefore, will require establishing a relationship with the Park's new manager. It will also be necessary to regain the support of the Ohio Division of Natural Resources. I remain convinced of the need for my work at Malabar Farm State Park. The excitement with which "Malabar Farm: Sharing the Vision" has been received by all who have reviewed it inspires me to continue my efforts until it is available to Malabar's visitors.